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The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism (An Essay in Atheistic Religion).

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If one cares to brush away from its pages a lot of writing about 'trash', 'venom', 'filth' and 'garbage' which is, like all rubbish, embarrassing, then one finds in this book an extremely honest and philosophically rigorous study of Georges Bataille. Honest, for two reasons: first of all, because Land will have no truck with those who seek to moralise the Nietzschean inheritance. Here his target is those post-structuralist writers (mainly Derrida and Lyotard) who celebrate the constant 'postponement' wrought by signification and give to this delay certain overtones of 'promise', 'tolerance' and 'openness', despite the fact that what is postponed will never arrive, and all that does arrive is condemned to destruction as a metaphysical pretence to essence, permanence and presence. The only destiny therefore, for 'things' and for 'subjects' is not postponement but annihilation.

This book is honest also, because it shows how for Bataille atheism was a positive creed, not at all a matter of 'doubt'. Indeed, once one has erected, like Bataille, an anti-ontology which rigorously excludes God, then one has dreamt up something as mystical as any other religious belief. Hence, for Bataille, all that there ultimately 'is', is the void into which solar energy would immediately dissipate through its full and glorious expenditure, were it not for the delays wrought by the accumulations of a global economy, including the human one. Yet, as Land well demonstrates in his chapter 'The Labyrinth', a 'pure expenditure', since it would be immediately lost, is never at work except in the delays wrought by every actual and living form. This despite the fact that such forms constitute a 'veil of Maya', an 'impossible' attempt to pretend that there are goals, stabilities and identities. Therefore 'reality' hovers in a fractal manner between an infinitely vanishing void, and appearances which can be endlessly exposed as illusions. This is no harder, yet no easier to believe in, than Nirvana, the Neoplatonic One, or a Creator God. However, both Land's and Bataille's honesty stop short at the point where they wish to pass off their act of existential choice as transcendental philosophy (so that void is categorical and appearances occupy the place of intuitions, and neither is without the other). Here Land fails to note that, in seeking to make science and religion coincide, Bataille was very much the heir of the French sociological tradition, just as he was a victim of many of their now ethnographically outdated analyses of 'sacrifice' and 'the gift' -- still believing in a thoroughly Victorian fashion that one can arrive at an essence of religion for all cultures.

To render their beliefs 'philosophical', both Bataille and Land have finally to abandon their anti-ontotheological critique of knowledge as 'representation' of an object. For like any old vulgar empiricist in an Oxbridge common-room they keep saying, in effect, 'There is death, look at it, let's stop trying to evade this ultimate fact'. Yet of course, as they really know, death cannot be looked at, just as the pre-ontological cannot be theoretically seen, and therefore is only arbitrarily characterised as chaos or the void. The only way out of this arbitrariness, for Land, is to proclaim that in humanity, and its religious fixations with sacrifice, 'terrestrial excess' is manifest. But this move involves re-instating anthropocentrism, and the uniquely revelatory role of humanity in relation to being! It also implies a restoration of the view that man is by essence a religious animal, together with an account of the essence of religion itself. Hence nihilism as transcendental philosophy turns out to be a disguised sociologism of a now discredited kind.

By contrast, if the pre-ontological cannot be seen, and is not unproblematically manifest, then one cannot theoretically rule out a transcendent reality which gives, which 'lets be', and in consequence the (pre) ontological primacy of Love. It is along these lines that (like the French philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion) one can still proclaim transcendence in a post-metaphysical fashion. However, throughout this book, Land repeats the Heideggerean error of conflating Platonic transcendence, which erects a hierarchy within a totality, with Hebraically derived transcendence which conceives of a donating source beyond time, in no relation with time (such that time and transcendence would equal a third thing bigger than both) and constantly re-giving time so as to prevent it ever constituting a totality. In failing to make such a distinction, Land is the victim of an outdated historiography, and this is even more the case when he treats Kant's critique of 'theism' as a critique of traditional Christian and Jewish thought, rather than of something which (as Amos Funkenstain and Michael Buckley have shown) was only invented in the seventeenth century. It is clear that Land really does suppose that Christians and Jews have worshipped 'a being' standing at the top of an ontological pyramid: thus in a notable howler, he cites Aquinas as believing that God only creates Prima Materia, and not composite beings -- the latter according to Land, being related by Aquinas to an eternal order of essences and therefore shielded from association with the nihil. In

fact, Aquinas only states this position to refute it, and affirm the direct emergence also of composites from nothing. Hence Land fails to see that the doctrine of a creator God can also, as much as immanentism, open to view 'direct collaboration with zero'. This, despite the fact that he notes that Bataille was much more an invertor of Catholic doctrine (such that creation ex nihilo becomes an ultimate nihilistic kenosis) than a neo-pagan.

If, in attacking 'Christian-Jewish-Platonic transcendence', Land is attacking a chimaera, then in his critique of poststructuralism his honesty does not always keep pace with his discernment. I have already referred to his account of 'unilateral difference': that which is the realm of appearances seems different from base matter (soul above body, sign above thing and so forth) is really no different at the level of base matter, chaos or void itself -- even though such 'indifference' is never concretely manifest. In what serious way, however, does this differ from the (anti)ontological schemes of Derrida and Lyotard? For if it is true that their rhetoric of postponement often suppresses death, it is equally true that Land's rhetoric of death suppresses a postponement which he nonetheless concedes: for he insists that death never finally arrives, since every component of a dissolved individual reality is re-used for a further act of global economic accumulation. In this case, the transcendent illusions which are 'subjects', signs pointing to signfieds and so forth, are no more simply 'superstructural' for Land than they are for the poststructuralists. One is left mystified by his polemic against the humanism latent in semiotics, since this only makes sense in terms of a crude materialism of casually prior base drives, which in the 'Labyrinth' chapter he clearly repudiates. Land surely exaggerates the gulf between Bataille and his friend Lacan, who in his later work stresses the imaginary and its direct link with the void, alongside the symbolic and its link to postponement (as Borsch-Jakobsen has pointed out).

The real difference between Land's ideas and post-structuralism concerns much more his undisguised nihilism. But even here, honesty falters and courage fails. We learn that Gilles de Rais' excesses are still to be condemned, since they show him to have been caught up in a voyeurism which belongs to the metaphysical privileging of representation. How convenient that this arch-deviant should still be a sinner under the canons of the new nihilist law! When all has been overthrown, with the utmost daring, political correctness is still maintained, since every violator turns out to have a habitual ocularist.

Apparently the brave young Nick stood out against God while still at primary school: sensing immediately that he was being passed off with a scummy old power-crazed onto-theological hybrid at every morning assembly. One can only reflect that it is a pity that our contemporaries have not outgrown such precocity.

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